



# Mixed Methods and Action Research: Methodologies for Special Education (In Press)

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Mixed Methods and Action Research are viable approaches for conducting special education research (Bruce & Pine, 2010; Christ, 2007; Collins, Onwuegbuzie & Sutton, 2006). These two methodologies are particularly useful in a range of applications from classroom and school wide interventions, policy analysis, and even research grant applications. Action Research in particular is most applicable when the purpose for conducting research is to solve practical problems of practice such as supporting students with disabilities. Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports and Response to Intervention techniques for example use many of the procedures applicable to Action Research including planning, acting, reflecting and modifying the intervention to make improvements. Although Action Research and Mixed Methods approaches are informed by distinct literatures, it is also possible to conceptualize Action Research as a form of Mixed Methods (e.g., Christ, 2010; Ivankova, 2015). This article therefore begins by describing Action Research as a form of Mixed Methods. From there, an argument is made that Action Research can be useful for demonstrating causal explanations in special education settings. Finally, this article presents how Action Research can be used as a framework when applying for federal funds earmarked for special education.

### Action Research is Mixed Methods

Action Research as a form of Mixed Methods (Billies, Francisco, Krueger & Lindville, 2010; Brown & Tandor, 2008; Christ, 2010) is particularly useful for studying interventions designed for diverse populations. Coghlan and Brannick (2010), Herr and Anderson (2015) and Creswell (2011) describe Action Research as a dynamic process involving an intervention. According to Kurt Lewin, Action Research “proceeds in a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact finding about the results of the action” (Lewin, 1946/48, p.206). Christ (2008, 2009, 2010) extended the definition of Mixed Methods to include Action Research as both methodologies share philosophical underpinnings, design characteristics, and many of the methods used to collect and analyze data. Perhaps the most profound commonality between Mixed Methods and Action Research is based on the fact that multiple forms of data are merged to draw inferences. Distinctions between Mixed Methods and Action Research have to do with the focus of the study, its purpose, and the potential to generalize the results. Both methodologies have historically been associated with pragmatism (Biesta, 2010; Bryman, 2007; Howe, 1988; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Morgan, 2007; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003) and transformative research (Mertens, 2007; Greene, 2007). Charles Sanders Pierce, William James, and John Dewey were the forefathers of pragmatism that values action in the creation of knowledge (Christ, 2010). Dewey’s theory of knowledge which includes indefinite interactions, knowing as the mode of experience that supports action, and the relationship between actions and consequences is well aligned with the Action Research movement.

### Action Research as a Methodology and a Paradigm

Action Research provides opportunities to create and assess interventions and programs as well as help practitioners improve their skills. Hendricks (2013) indicates that Action Research as a system of inquiry is most useful for teachers, administrators, and school support personnel as they “can use to study, change, and improve their work with children and in schools” (p. 13). As noted above, action researchers follow a general set of procedures although the exact steps may differ from one study to the next. Hence, what classifies Action Research as a methodology is it involves going through a cyclical process that includes planning, acting, observing, reflecting, and revising.

### Action Research and Federal Funding:

Federal agencies have a history of funding Action Research projects. Presented below is the methodology used in the context of a \$1.4 million grant funded by the United States Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS). The grant demonstrates the importance of a clearly articulated problem and purpose statement (Christ, 2010; Christ 2014; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009) and concise research questions as the driving force behind choosing an appropriate methodology (Neweman & Houchins, 2017).

